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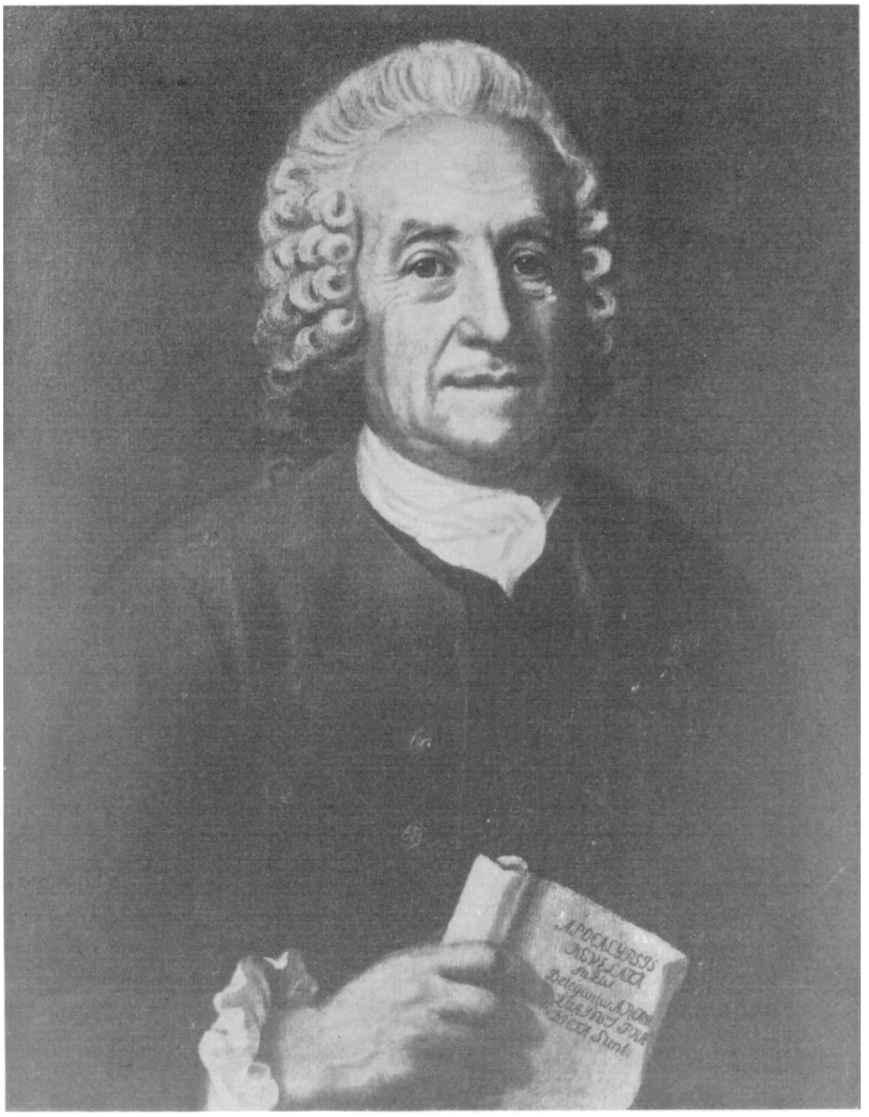

EMANUEL SWEDENBORG

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EMANUEL SWEDENBORG

By Dr. JOHN R. SWANTON
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THE two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the birth of Emanuel Swedenborg, which occurred on January 29, 1688, and is being widely celebrated by his admirers, renews attention to one of the most remarkable characters of history, a man so many sided that he made distinguished contributions to several branches of science, aided materially in advancing the industries of his native Sweden, and attained distinction as a philosopher and theologian. On one and the same day he could lead the conversation with geologists, physicists, physiologists, metallurgists, engineers, statesmen, philosophers—and angels.

Swedenborg was descended on both sides from families intimately connected with the mining interests of Fahlun, in the present Kopparberg Province, but his own father, Jesper Swedberg, many of whose characteristics he shared, was a successful minister of the state church who finally rose to the position of Bishop of Skara, was known as a poet and philologist, and noted for his breadth of view, his utter fearlessness and his earnest endeavors to promote education. His attempts to improve the Swedish hymn and psalm book served to bring upon him the charge of heresy. Heretic or not, he was popular with his sovereigns and was ennobled together with his family by Queen Ulrica Eleonora in 1719, the family name being then changed from Swedberg to Swedenborg.

Emanuel graduated from the University of Upsala in 1709 and soon afterward made the acquaintance of Christopher Polhem, the greatest Swedish engineer of his time, whose favorite he soon became. In 1710 he visited England bent upon the pursuit of scientific studies then advancing rapidly in the United Kingdom under the stimulus supplied by Sir Isaac Newton whose works he studied daily, and he made the acquaintance of Flamsteed, Halley and Woodward, through whom he was introduced to other members of the Royal Society. His thirst for learning at this time appears to have been unquenchable. Not merely was he an omnivorous reader, but he was in the habit of boarding with various craftsmen and learning from them their several trades. In Sweden he had already acquired the art of bookbinding and made shift to play the cathedral organ. In London he added in this way some knowledge of watchmaking, cabinetmaking and the making of mathematical instruments. Later, in Holland, he learned how to grind lenses for microscopes. But he devoted most of his time to mathematics and astronomy and also acted as agent for the small group of men in Sweden who were beginning to interest themselves in scientific studies. He returned to his own country in 1715 after about two years in England, visiting on the way Holland, France and northern Germany, his enthusiasm for scientific work throughout that period being evidenced by his correspondence with his brother-in-law, Eric Benzelius, librarian of the University of Upsala. From these letters it appears that his mind was also busy with attempted inventions, and among them he mentions a submarine, a hydraulic engine, a new type of lock, a fire engine, a machine gun, a mechanical musical instrument, a mercury air-pump and an airship. Of the last of these, which he was frank enough to recognize as at that time unworkable, we have a drawing and description. The air-pump is said to have been the first to involve the use of mercury. He was particularly en-

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grossed with "a new method of determining the longitude of places by means of the moon."

Returning to his native land full of plans for the promotion of learning, he found his efforts constantly thwarted by indifference, vested interests and shortage of funds due mainly to the imperialistic enterprises of Charles XII. He was particularly disappointed at the opposition of the mathematicians and remarks of them:

> It is a fatality with the mathematicians that they remain mostly in theory. I have thought that it would be a profitable thing if to ten mathematicians there was added one thoroughly practical man, by whom the others could be led to market; in which case this one man would gain more renown and be of more use than all the ten together.

Which goes to show how times have changed.

Although thwarted in this direction, Swedenborg went to work industriously to establish a scientific journal, the first number of which came out in 1716. It was called *Daedalus Hyperboreus* and lasted until 1718, though only six numbers appeared in all. The year in which the first of these saw the light he was given a position on the Board of Mines which had supervision over the great mining industries of the country, but he was only an "extraordinary assessor," serving without salary, and in the early years of his incumbency he was detached at times for special services under Polhem. The most striking of these was the transportation overland from Stromstad to the Iddefjord, a distance of fourteen miles, of two galleys, five large boats and one sloop, to assist Charles XII in the siege of Frederickshald (now Halden), Norway, in 1718. The enterprise was carried through under Swedenborg's immediate supervision. He was engaged similarly in the construction of the great dock at Carlscrona and on the North Sea-Baltic Canal, the latter left unfinished at that time, owing to the death of the king.

Besides the activities above enumerated he was busy with a scheme for the extensive production of salt in Sweden, plans for a new slow-combustion stove, a new method of detecting mineral veins and a decimal system of coinage and measures, but he found, like many another progressive before him, that, in his own words, "speculations and arts like these are left to starve" and "are looked upon by a set of political blockheads as scholastic matters, which must remain in the background, while their own supposed refined ideas and their intrigues occupy the foreground."

Thoroughly disgusted with this attitude toward the newer learning in the land of his birth, Swedenborg now thought seriously of seeking his fortune abroad as a mining engineer, but instead, in 1721, set out on a journey to Holland and Germany in the interest of the Board of Mines, and he visited all the workings in Saxony and the Hartz Mountains. Upon his return the year following he laid before the board and the king simultaneously proposals for increasing the yield of copper from the ore, for improvements in the manufacture of steel, and for the removal of the handicap then placed upon iron by a short-sighted distinction between that metal and copper according to which the latter was classified as "nobler" and favored accordingly. He expressed a belief, contrary to the uniform practice of the time, that "there ought to be no secrets at all in metallurgy."

In 1724 Swedenborg was appointed a regular salaried "assessor" of the Board of Mines, and the same year Sir Hans Sloane invited him to send contributions on metallurgy to the Brtish Royal Society. He pursued the duties of his office with characteristic energy, and in 1734 some of the results of these labors appeared in the form of three heavy folio volumes entitled "Opera Philosophica et Mineralia," two of which contained treatises on copper and iron, respectively, and gave him immediately a European repu-

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tation, parts being translated into French and German and reprinted in those languages. The first of the three, however, received more enduring attention as the earliest attempt to set forth a theory of cosmic evolution similar to that later made familiar by Laplace under the name of "the nebular hypothesis." In 1740 Linnaeus invited him to become a member of the Royal Academy of Science of Sweden, which had been founded the year before, and he was also made a corresponding member of the Academy of Sciences of St. Petersburg.

Swedenborg's narrative of his visit to Germany to have the "Opera Philosophica" printed—it appeared in Dresden and Leipzig—reveals an insatiable curiosity, but a mind primarily attracted by mechanical processes and rather markedly deficient in the esthetic faculty, a common fault of the period. He visited libraries, museums, picture galleries, churches, monasteries, asylums, theaters, but especially manufactories, and his notes concern mostly scientific matters, such as mining; blast furnaces; vitriol, arsenic and sulfur works; naval architecture; copper and tin manufactures; paper mills; plate glass and mirrors; magnetism; and hydrostatics. He was interested in things "practical" and scientific rather than in antiques or in painting and sculpture. He was abroad again from 1736 to 1740 and 1743 to 1744, and his diaries covering these years contain many interesting items, including an expression of admiration for republican government as exemplified by Holland as opposed to monarchies, an expression all the more remarkable since he and his family had little reason to complain of their treatment by the sovereigns of Sweden.

II

As a principal object in each of these journeys Swedenborg had in mind the publication of a bulky work, the first of which has been translated into English as "The Economy of the Animal Kingdom" and the second as "The Animal Kingdom." These names obscure, however, the purpose which the books subserved and the character of the investigation upon which their author had embarked. As far back as 1719 he showed his interest in the nature of organic life by submitting to the Royal Medical College a small treatise entitled "The Anatomy of our Most Subtle Nature Showing that our Moving and Living Force Consists of Tremulations," and this interest possessed him so completely by the time he had published the "Opera Philosophica" that he devoted more and more time to it, undertook dissections himself, and began to collate materials from the writings of the great anatomists and physiologists of the period, including such men as Baglivi, Boerhaave, Eustachius, Harvey, Leeuwenhoek, Malpighi, Morgagni, Swammerdam and Vieussens, men famous in the history of science and many of whose names are connected with organs in the human body. The enterprise he had in mind was similar to that which moved the founders of the science of psychology, even though psyches are now out of fashion in that discipline. In brief, Swedenborg proposed to himself a thorough-going attempt to attain to a knowledge of the soul by studying its manifestations in the human organism. This purpose is at once revealed in the correct translations of the titles of the two works just mentioned which should read, "The Economy of the Soul Kingdom" and "The Soul Kingdom."

In pursuing this work, Swedenborg drew more, ostensibly at least, from the writings of others than from his own investigations, with the deliberate intention of correcting any tendency toward personal bias in the interpretation of organic phenomena. His method of presentation was to place first quotations from the authorities of his time on some fluid of the body or some organ, attempt an induction from the mass of evidence as to its functions and its relation to the other parts of

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the body, and finally take up his induction sentence by sentence and support each in turn with confirmatory evidence. This was a favorite system which he employed throughout the remainder of his life. The works just metioned represent two different approaches. In the first period he was interested mainly in the fluids of the body, in the second he was rather concerned with separate organs. In fact, his literary remains show that he changed his plan several times, and, besides the published works, he left in manuscript a huge amount of material which was to have gone into other portions, some of which has been printed since his death, while other documents are still in the shape in which he left them, although nearly all have now been photocopied to insure preservation.

III

Between 1743 and 1745 occurred the psychological break in Swedenborg's life which has attracted the greatest attention to him and may perhaps be said to have made him more noteworthy than famous. His first period closed with a work in semi-poetical style entitled "The Worship and Love of God," in which he attempted to present his philosophical views in a unified form. Immediately afterward came the long series of writings on which rest his claims as a theologian. Meanwhile, alongside of his scientific, philosophical and now theological activities, he was energetically interesting himself as a member of the House of Nobles in the activities of the Swedish Diet. His proposals for the improvement of mining have already been mentioned. In 1734 he strongly opposed entering upon a war against Russia, advocating instead measures to build up the internal prosperity of the country, and in 1741–43 his judgment was vindicated when the war party prevailed and Sweden was nearly ruined in consequence. In 1755 came a memorial on the liquor traffic, the substance of which is given in the following paragraph:

> If the distilling of whiskey—provided the public can be prevailed upon to accede to the measure—were farmed out in all judicial districts, and also in towns, to the highest bidder, a considerable revenue might be obtained for the country, and the consumption of grain might also be reduced: that is, if the consumption of whiskey can not be done away with altogether, which would be more desirable for the country's welfare and morality than all the income which could be realized from so pernicious a drink.

In 1760 he presented several memorials on the currency, and, in the most important of these, after advocating several minor measures, he concludes:

> But all are of little value, except one, which consists in returning to a specie currency, such as existed in Sweden heretofore, and as exists in all countries of the world: for in specie itself lies the real value of exchange. If any country could exist by means of a paper currency, which signifies money, but is not money; such a country would be unparalleled in the world.

From 1745 until his death in London on March 29, 1772, he continued indefatigably the writing and publishing of his theological works, which, including unpublished manuscripts, number eighty-three titles, while his papers on science and natural philosophy number about one hundred and twenty. The former brought into existence the religious body usually known by his name, Swedenborg having been, I believe, the only man with claims to scientific eminence who founded a religious sect. It may be added that he himself took no active part in the foundation and died before it came into existence. His body was interred in the small Swedish church in London and remained there until 1909, when it was taken back to Sweden in a war vessel with national honors and finally placed in a sarcophagus in Upsala Cathedral, unveiled by H. M. Gustav V, King of Sweden, on November 19, 1910.

IV

Some idea has already been given of the considerable debt which the promotion of science in Sweden owes to this "visionary." One of his early ambitions was the foundation of a "Society for

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Learning and Science," another the establishment of a chair of mechanics at the University of Upsala, and, in conjunction with his brother-in-law, he earnestly advocated the erection of an astronomical observatory at the same university. He prepared the first work on algebra to appear in the Swedish language, which shows his interest in promoting the study, though the work itself is not of much distinction. His plans for a mercury pump and the improvement of stoves are said to have involved important technical advances but for lack of sufficient research it is impossible to say for precisely how many innovations he was responsible. There can be no question, however, that the great mining enterprises of Sweden were very greatly advanced by him, partly through the publication of the results of his researches in copper and iron, partly by his advocacy of the introduction of rolling-mills into Sweden, and partly by his recommendation that the handicap already mentioned be removed from iron.

V

It is not easy to enumerate Swedenborg's own contributions to science. It will be sufficient to quote the remarks of scientists in a position to express opinions in their several fields. Thus, the chemist Jean Baptiste Dumas says: "It is then to him we are indebted for the first idea of making cubes, tetrahedrons, pyramids, and the different crystalline forms, by grouping the spheres; and it is an idea which has since been renewed by several distinguished men, Wollaston in particular." Van't Hoff also commends his work as prophetic of the science of stereo-chemistry, of which he himself was such a distinguished exponent. Svante Arrhenius thus summarizes the results of his own investigations:

> If we briefly summarize the ideas, which were first given expression to by Swedenborg, and afterwards, although usually in a much modified form—consciously or unconsciously—taken up by other authors in cosmology, we find them to be the following:
>
> The planets in our solar system originate from the solar matter—taken up by Buffon, Kant, Laplace, and others.
>
> The earth—and the other planets—have gradually removed themselves from the sun and received a gradually lengthened time of revolution —a view expressed by G. H. Darwin.
>
> The earth's time of rotation, that is to say, the day's length, has been gradually increased—a view again expressed by G. H. Darwin.
>
> The suns are arranged around the Milky Way —taken up by Wright, Kant, and Lambert.
>
> There are still greater systems, in which the Milky Ways are arranged—taken up by Lambert.

Professor A. G. Nathorst, superintendent of the State Museum for Fossil Plants at Stockholm, praises Swedenborg very highly for his contributions in the field of geology and particularly commends him for having made the observation that the Scandinavian Peninsula is rising. Swedenborg saw, he says, "that many phenomena which testified to a higher water-level in former times did not arise from the so-called universal [Noachic] flood, and this in itself involves a step forward in the direction of complete liberation from the dogma which had prevailed up to that time, and which had exercised such a restrictive influence on the development of geology."

Professor O. M. Ranström, professor of anatomy in the University of Upsala, remarks, "As is well known, Swedenborg, by his investigations, obtained an insight into the fact that it is the surface of the cerebrum, the grey cortex of the brain, which serves as the material basis of psychical phenomena"; and Dr. Gustav Retzius, in his address as president of the Congress of Anatomists, delivered at Heidelberg on May 29, 1903, repeats the above in substance and adds, "Swedenborg . . . has not only predicted the localization of the motor centers of the cortical substances, in harmony with the views gained from pathological and physiological experiences during the latter half of the past century, but he has even on the

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whole correctly pointed out the seat of these centers!''

These statements are endorsed by Professor Max Neuberger, professor of the history of medicine in the University of Vienna, who in 1910 said, speaking of the results of some of Swedenborg's physiological researches, ''If we examine these results we are forced to admit that, regarded from the point of view of modern knowledge, they surpass nearly everything that is to be read elsewhere on this subject in the writings of the eighteenth-century authors.''

More recently a reviewer of the new edition of Swedenborg's work on ''The Brain'' writes in *The Lancet* (April 6, 1935):

> He ascribes the motor areas of the brain to the positions now known to be the correct ones, even to the relative positions of the areas controlling the head, arms, trunk, and lower limbs. He also locates the intellectual faculties in the frontal region of the brain. In common with many philosophers of his time, he was much troubled about what part of the brain was occupied by the ''soul''; he discarded entirely the theory of Descartes, largely held at that time, that the ''soul'' resided in the pineal body, but ascribes it rather to the cortex of the brain. From an analysis of the minute structure, as then known, of the pituitary gland, he was led to ascribe to it functions of the utmost importance in the composition of the blood, and, in fact, calls it the ''arch gland'' of the body.

It may be added that in his ''Principia,'' if not before, Swedenborg set forth the idea that heat is a mode of motion. He also has the merit of proposing a compound and ''soft'' atom instead of the ''hard'' atom of Newton and he adopted the undulatory theory of light of Huyghens instead of the corpuscular hypothesis of Newton. The ''points of pure motion'' which he makes the ultimates of matter suggest the later theory of Boscovich.

Strange as it may seem, some of the opinions advanced by Swedenborg after the time when he was accused of insanity by his contemporaries represent distinct advances over those previously held by him and by the students of his day. While certain of these are of a philosophical and theological character, there are instances which concern the scientific field. Thus, in his earlier writings he had attempted to reconcile his theory of terrestrial evolution with the letter of Scripture in the matter of the Noachic flood by supposing that the earliest solid land surface was formed over the waters after the manner of ice, that organic life arose and flourished upon this crust, that upon it Adam and Eve were created—though even then he balked at the literal narrative—and that the breaking up of this crust was meant by the Biblical words ''and the fountains of the great deep were broken up.'' But in the ''Arcana Coelestia,'' the first of his strictly theological works, he avers that the first chapters of Genesis are not to be taken verbatim, that no literal deluge was meant, ''still less a universal deluge,'' and that there were ''preadamites'' who lived ''like wild beasts'' before the dawn of civilization.

It is to be observed that some of Swedenborg's contributions to knowledge above noted have reference to human ideas regarding knowledge rather than to knowledge itself, and it is the writer's impression that the main contribution of this remarkable Swede was in aiding the transition from catastrophic theories of the creation of the cosmos to the modern evolutionary position. In explanation of this statement it must be said that Swedenborg was practically the first thinker to suggest a development of the cosmos in time in an orderly sequence in accordance with natural law. Professor Magnus Nyrén, writing in the *Viertlejahrschrift der Astronomischen Gesellschaft* (Volume XIV, 1879), says:

> It can not be denied that the essential part of the nebular hypothesis, namely, that the whole solar system has been formed out of a single chaotic mass, which first rolled itself together into a colossal ball and subsequently by rotation broke up into several parts and finally contracted into the planetary masses, was first expressed by Swedenborg.

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This has been recognized by many other scientists and should be self-evident from an examination of Swedenborg's "Principia Rerum Naturalium" and a comparison of the date of its publication (1734) with that of Kant's "Allgemeine Naturgeschichte und Theorie des Himmels" (1755) and Laplace's "Exposition du système du monde" (1796). It is to be added that Laplace professed to have had the idea of the nebular hypothesis suggested to him by Buffon, and a copy of Swedenborg's "Principia" is known to have been in the latter's library.

This work must be weighed, not in the exacting scales of the science of our time but with reference to the crude observatoins and the crude instruments upon which they depended in the infancy of modern science. The bases of Swedenborg's attack were sound, since he postulated "experience," in which he included experiment and a rational systematization of the facts of experience. He attempted to found his theory of leasts, "the corpuscular theory" as he calls it, on studies of the behavior of liquids, salts and metals, and his general cosmic theory on the phenomena of magnetism. He was inspired, as well as handicapped, by Descartes's conception of vortices, and it can not be said that he showed scientific penetration in handling the mathematics and mechanics involved in his theory. He is remarkable for qualitative conceptions rather than mathematical realizations. For a brilliant treatment from this point of view the world had to wait for Laplace, and even then the resulting hypothesis was ultimately found defective. Swedenborg's hypothesis was, however, superior to that of Kant in that it assumed motion at the beginning, and in one particular it went behind all later theories in attempting to gather into one evolutionary process not merely the mineral and gaseous substances, but the media in which light and electricity, magnetism and gravitation reside, which he assumed to be connected with spheres of varying degrees of subtlety, and imagined the most subtle had produced the grosser in successive order. Workable or not, the theory had a phenomenal basis for each of the entities introduced into it. But although Swedenborg represents prior elements as entering into and constituting those more inert, in his final treatment he points out that the apparently simple is itself immensely complex and far more active than the "corpuscles" built out of it. Thus, he practically arrived at the conclusion that inorganic evolution is a kind of limiting or stopping down of forces and that in plant and animal organisms these are progressively released. This suggests rather strongly the "unpacking" process of evolution of Bateson.

In his treatment of the origin of organic life our author was hampered, however, by the theology of his time and the limitations it placed upon sidereal and terrestrial chronology. He compared the original nebular mass out of which the solar system arose, and again the earth itself before organic life came into existence, to an egg, but for the reason just given, was unable to carry out this productive thought to its logical conclusion, and the nearest he got to organic evolution is perhaps in the following passage from "The Worship and Love of God":

> This virgin and new-born earth, furnished with so becoming an aspect, now represented a kind of new egg, but one laden with as many small eggs, or small seeds, collected at its surface, as were to be of its future triple kingdom, namely, the mineral, the vegetable, and the animal. These seeds or beginnings lay as yet unseparated in their rudiments, one folded up in another, namely, the vegetable kingdom in the mineral kingdom, which was to be the matrix, and the animal kingdom in the vegetable kingdom, which was to serve as a nurse or nourisher; for each was afterwards to come forth distinctly from its covering. Thus the present contained the past, and what was to come lay concealed in each, for one thing involved another in a continual series.

This passage is as pregnant with possibilities as Swedenborg's new-born

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earth, but in his thought it took the direction of a parallel evolution of species from particular vegetable forms directly to particular animal forms, and the possibilities remained unrealized by him. This parallelism was due in part to the fact that he believed that plant and animal organisms were divided into great classes depending upon a close connection with the air, the ether or the magnetic or gravitational element, those related to the subtler elements being higher in the scale. With all its shortcomings, this theory of Swedenborg's presented a picture of cosmic unfoldment, particularly in its earlier chapters, which marked a distinct step toward the systems of natural evolution that were so soon to follow and there is good reason to believe helped to bring them into existence.

VII

The fact must not be lost to sight that a unifying thread runs through Swedenborg's cosmic views from 1717, when he penned a few brief paragraphs "On the Causes of Things," until the end of his career. The later works amend and change the applications of his cardinal principles but do not abolish them. One of these is the doctrine of series and degrees based on the assumption that gravitation, magnetism, light and sound exist in elements of progressively less subtlety, the lowest being the atmospheric air, and that they originally came into existence in this order, that because they are composed of substances from these elements there is a similar differentiation among minerals, plants and animals. This creation of the grosser out of the subtler and subsequent modification by the subtler gives us the doctrine of influx. Instead of approaching simplicity, however, as we ascend the ladder of degrees, we are really coming to more complex entities, or at least entities with greater potentialities, and therefore we have immense varieties in the mineral kingdom and still greater varieties in the vegetable and animal worlds. Each specific variation in any of these kingdoms has its reason for existence, not its immediate cause, in something in a higher degree to which it corresponds, and this is his doctrine of correspondences. The forms which minerals and organisms have depend upon their lesser or greater correspondence with reality itself or God who is to be conceived of, not as personal or impersonal but as superpersonal, inorganic substances being the most remote and partial reflections of deity, vegetable species a closer reflection, animal species a still closer reflection, and men the closest of all. Individual men are themselves but partial reflections of the great reality and so tend to become linked together into larger and larger bodies through division of functions, the sum total of which is an increasingly more perfect image of deity. This is the doctrine of the greatest man. Of course this discussion has led us into theology, but it has been necessary in order to give something like a total view of the position of Swedenborg in the world of natural and spiritual philosophy.

Crude as the above exposition has been, it will perhaps explain in some measure why Swedenborg has been found worthy of respectful, often of enthusiastic, consideration by thinkers as diverse as Balzac, Coleridge, Carlyle, the Brownings, Coventry Patmore, Emerson, James Freeman Clark, Phillips Brooks, Henry James, Sr., August Strindberg, Theophilus Parsons, John Bigelow, Helen Keller, Edwin Markham and many more. He was first widely known as a theologian and for his placid and unruffled claims to spiritual illumination, publicized by such works as Kant's "Dreams of a Spirit Seer" and Emerson's essay on "The Mystic" in "Representative Men." Only at a relatively recent period have students been aware of the immense volume of scientific and philosophical study which went before.

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